
Local and Communal Politics on the Web
Going with the Flow or genuine Political Communication?
With special Focus at the Viennese Districts

Abstract

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1 Introduction

In recent times it has become quite common that almost every company and organization – being concerned with e-business or not – publish their own websites. While this has become a ‘must-have’, hardly disputed by anyone, it is still quite unclear whether there is a quantifiable benefit to be generated from such a website, especially in the small-business / local area.

The www has already established itself as a means of political information for the individual; the merits for that fact have to go to comprehensive web-presences of newspapers and magazines, but also to a vast amount of independent or dissident media. The question to be asked is about the importance political party communication for the internet as such, and how important the influences are to political opinion-forming and actual election results.

This paper shall explore the fitness of the www as a means of communication for political parties in a local and communal context by examining internet activities of district-based local party chapters in Vienna.

2 Summary of Results

The results of this research project shall be summarized by going through the three hypotheses that were made to form the basis for the paper. Each hypothesis will guide the reader through a certain segment of the overall research.

2.1 Hypothesis I – the internet is a suitable medium

HYPOTHESIS I: The internet as a medium is a suitable means of influencing political opinions in a way that can cause quantifiable results in democratic elections – this also applies to Austria and the special area of local and communal politics.

The internet is the first medium to incorporate elements of mass media while it also provides a feedback channel that allows the individual to interact. By doing so it perfectly fulfils Marshall McLuhan’s concept of ‘Cybernation’, where everyone today lives “in the age of information and of communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a

total field of interacting events in which all men participate.”¹ The internet takes on three important political roles²:

- Politics *for* the net (*policy*)
- Politics *through* the net (Cyberpolitics, *polity*)
- Politics *in* the Net (*politics*)

It is the latter, which is subject of this paper; this is the part that is concerned with communicating ideas, arguments and information and that is used for actual political campaigning since the mid-nineties. This experience of ten years is well documented in a number of publications, which basically all agree that the internet is a suitable tool to address (parts of) the public in a political context.

According to recent studies³ the cosmopolitan area of Vienna should be home to 500.000 to 550.000 registered voters who – judging from their online-behaviour – could be potentially reached and influenced using the www.

2.2 Hypothesis II – some districts are more eligible to political web-communication

HYPOTHESIS II: Function and relevance of political internet-presence is influenced by an array of socio-demographic factors. That means that especially at the field of local politics some districts are more susceptible to political communication in the internet than others, and that those districts can be identified by their specific socio-demographic data.

Since circumstances of life, such as income, age, language and education, are major influences to the personal online-behaviour it is safe to assume that differences in the socio-demographic landscape favours some districts and deprives others. On the basis of existing socio-demographic data⁴ it must therefore be possible to create a matrix that allows identifying the internet-susceptibility of each district according to a scale from 1 to 5.⁵

¹ McLuhan, 2004, S.269.

² Also see: Siedschlag / Rogg / Welzel, 2002, S.9ff, Leggewie, 1998, S.20f and Leggewie / Bieber, 2001, S.37.

³ Also see: Statistik Austria, 2004, online in the www under URL: <ftp://www.statistik.at/pub/neuerscheinungen/2005/ikt2004.pdf> [03.06.2005].

⁴ Also see: Statistik Austria, 2004a, online in the www under URL: <http://www.statistik.at/blickgem/index.jsp> [03.06.2005].

⁵ 1 being the best result, just as in Austrian school grades.

The results of that examination show that the different districts of Vienna can easily be ranked according to the potential usefulness of internet campaigning. Two districts reached the perfect score of 1, another two the worst case of 5.

2.3 Hypothesis III – the potential is not met

HYPOTHESIS III: The potential of opinion forming by means of the internet is not met at the current time. One of the reasons for that is that responsible functionaries do not fully understand and exercise the opportunities provided by the medium.

The websites of all relevant parties (on country-, province- and communal level) were examined according to a mix of criteria, consolidated to three factors:

- Content: quantity, quality and variety of contents; topicality
- Form: usability, modernness, cross-browser-compatibility (*not* stylishness)
- Interactivity: quantity and quality of interactive content

The result of that examination is that while the top-down content is quite comprehensive in many cases, the interactivity and chances for participation are basically zero. Existing attempts to implement interactive content seem to be uncoordinated and not backed up by research about user needs and requirements. Usability and cross-browser-compatibility also need improvement. The possibilities of multimedia (sound, video, etc.) are only exhausted way below the possibilities.

There was no causal connection detected between the quality of the internet-presence and the results of the latest election on communal level. Also, the websites of highest quality are not necessarily the ones in the districts that are most internet-susceptive.

The disarray detected by those case studies is backed up by the results of a poll held among functionaries in local politics. The results basically show that the internet is not used up to its potential – local political communication in the www is therefore currently more ‘going with the flow’ than a serious means of marketing.

Literature

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